

MedCom expects to treat thousands

Wyoming Guard treats nearly 600 on first day on the ground

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BASE CAMP RAMBALA – Nearly 600 Panamanian nationals arrived en masse for healthcare provided by the U.S. Army National Guard at a school in the small village of Punta Pena on Friday. It was medical attention that the local population had not seen for months or even years.

In the spirit of “Estamos Unidos,” and the mission named New Horizons, 35 National Guard soldiers based in Cheyenne, Wyo., offered medical services to the local population in a village that sits in Panama’s northernmost province, Bocas del Toro. In the days to follow, the unit will travel to remote communities Quebrada Pasto and Norteno. Both Panamanian and U.S. officials expect to see thousands by the end of 10-day mission.

The MedCom, led by Col. Joseph Horam, arrived at base camp less than 24 hours before propping up green tables and wide array of medical equipment in classrooms throughout the school. “Treatment will vary,” said Horam, who has twice deployed to Iraq in Balad and Baghdad. “Some may have had minimal care in some locations with remote access. As word spreads, we may see more people coming from the outlying areas.” The Soldiers treated 586 patients on the first day.

Those who come will be welcomed and seen by doctors, optometrists, dentists, a physicians assistant, and one nurse practitioner, according to Horam. “We’ll align with local health care providers, hopefully setting the example,” he said. “We will learn some things as well. It is important to keep in mind that we are ambassadors here.”

Capt. Jason Vogt brings that spirit. A pediatric dentist on loan from the Nebraska National Guard in Omaha knows the value of such missions, having taken his expertise to Morocco, Belize and South Africa. “Here, we’re mainly limited to extractions,” he said. “In Morocco, we (pulled) about 250 teeth a day. But, there’s a likelihood of seeing other things we haven’t seen in the States.”

Mireya Castillo, the director of the school in Punta Pena, wishes the soldiers could be here every year. “Our community is fairly poor,” she said, “A lot of people don’t have insurance. The majority of people work the land, and they don’t always have the economic means to afford healthcare.”

Castillo, an educator for 28 years, guides 1,080 students in pre-school through the 9th Grade. She talked with the students’ parents, with whom she has close relationships, to help spread the good news. “We try to have everyone come and take advantage because it’s free,

and it's good service," she said. "Having this type of service available motivates them to come, and the experience in the end is that everyone is glad to be here."

Francisca Montenegro, a resident in Punta Pena, brought her two girls, Zuleimi Sanchez, 7, Zulini, 10, and her niece Yuleiza Delmengor, 8. She said she's been waiting about a month for a visit to the doctor. Montenegro tried to take her daughter to the clinic, "but it takes too long. The office ran out of numbers," she said, about the process for making the first appointment.

Coordination for the unit's arrival began a year ago with a directive by Panamanian President Martin Torrijos Espino. A few months later, the order settled into the able hands of Dr. Antonio R. Holder, a dentist by trade. Holder took the reigns in coordinating all humanitarian medical missions for Panama's Ministry of Health with the U.S. Embassy in Panama City for New Horizons.

"The president determined what areas would be served. In Bocas del Toro, 30 to 40 percent of the population lives in poverty and lacks adequate health services," he said. "Most of these people live in the mountains and jungles."

Holder explained that the country's doctors would rather practice their specialties in Panama City than to work in the remote locations of northern Panama. "All we have is a medical assistant in each of the communities," he said. "All these assistants have is an exam room and small pharmacy. When they do travel out to the remote locations, they can only manage illnesses such as colds and small parasites."

Soldiers like Spec. Jeffery Dannemiller, a combat medic, from Cody, Wyo., learned about the demand first-hand. He watched with the fellow soldiers of his unit as a line grew outside the school grounds and along the gate that stretched from one end of the school to the other. He worked patiently, saying this is an opportunity for him to learn from doctors and nurses in his first overseas mission.

Dannemiller, 20, currently attends the University of Wyoming majoring in pre-med. "When I was a kid, I always wanted to be a part of the military," he said. "I also knew that college was important. So, being with the Guard allowed me the opportunity to pursue this life-long dream."

After the first day, soldiers and the townspeople of Punta Pena expressed their gratitude. "You come away with a greater appreciation for everything," Vogt said. "You come out of here a little more humble. I tell soldiers to go on these missions for the chance to see things they have never seen before."

Castillo captured what it meant to the community: "I know that a lot of the soldiers have come so far to be here, and we are grateful."

Photos:

079 - Navy Cmdr. Guidon Valdes examines Zuleimi Sanchez Montenegro, 7, while her older sister Zulini, 10, and her mother Francisca look on.

043 - Nearly 600 Panamanian nationals stood in line Thursday morning for health exams provided by the Wyoming National Guard in the village of Punta Pena.

096(mug) – Spc. Jeffery Dannemiller, Wyoming Army National Guard Medical Command